

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 540

EC 303 128

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TITLE Does Canada Care for the Gifted Student?
PUB DATE Sep 92
NOTE 7p.; In: Images in Transition; see EC 303 125.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.)
(120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Needs; *Educational Policy; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Gifted; *Government Role; Labeling (of Persons); Mainstreaming; Mathematics Education; Regular and Special Education Relationship; Science Education; Social Integration; Special Needs Students; Trend Analysis

IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the importance of caring for gifted children and identifies specific challenges facing Canada as the country tries to provide caring gifted education. "Caring" is defined and the importance of modeling caring behaviors so that children learn to care for others is stressed. The paper summarizes legislation and policies concerning services to gifted learners in the various provinces. The paper then identifies and discusses specific issues affecting gifted education in Canada, including: (1) the regular education initiative and the implications for gifted education of efforts toward increased integration of students with disabilities; (2) increased focus on math and science; and (3) trends toward a noncategorical perspective on all learners with special needs (especially in British Columbia and Saskatchewan). (DB)

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Does Canada Care for the Gifted Student?

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As an introductory remark, please allow me to express my appreciation to the executive committee of this gathering for having put together this joint conference and symposium. A conference allows speakers to present various perspectives on an issue, whereas a symposium is the meeting of a group to share experiences and advance the study of a phenomenon. You have joined together the strengths of your Third Annual SAGE Conference here in Alberta with the 6th Canadian Symposium on Gifted Education. I think it is fortunate for all of us here tonight that you have put together what Dr. Joseph Renzulli would probably call a Confratute (which is his combination of conference and institute).

Upon each of my visits to the western provinces of Canada, I am always touched by the beauty of the land and the kindness of the people. Your theme "Images in transition" may suggest that certain things do change... other things must remain, namely your beauty and kindness.

Before asking if Canada does care for the gifted learners, it is important to clarify what caring means, why caring for the gifted is so important, and how can we show caring behavior?

WHAT DOES CARING MEAN?

Caring has been defined as providing serious attention to something or someone or to be worried about or to like or to be fond of. In a book by Milton Mayeroff in 1971, entitled "On Caring", the author specifies that caring is the antithesis of simply using other persons to satisfy one's own needs. To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help another person grow and self-actualize.

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Caring, as helping another person grow and actualize himself, is a process, a way of relating to someone that involves development, in the same way that friendship can only emerge in time through mutual trust and a deepening of the relationship.

When we care for a child, a student or a companion, we experience and often express positive feelings while being with that person or while witnessing the accomplishments of that person. The positive feelings are nearly always perceived by the child, student and companion and felt as a generating force of positive energy.

If caring is helping a person grow and self-actualize, why is it so important for the gifted student to be cared for?

WHY IS CARING IMPORTANT TO THE GIFTED LEARNER?

You are going to say that it is very important for the gifted and talented to experience caring because it allows them to grow and to self-actualize... and that is true... but there is another highly important reason why we need to care for the gifted, and that is because it is through a caring relationship that we become able to care for others. If the gifted are our most precious resources to ensure the development of our world, our nation, our environment, our future; it may be important that we make sure that our gifted and talented learners are persons who care...

In our current society of violence, political debates, competitions and devastating environments, we need leaders who care.

It is therefore quite important to care for the gifted, to allow them to acquire a sense of caring through meaningful relationship in which caring is mutual, each cares for the other. Caring then becomes contagious. It is through modelling and imitation that human qualities such as caring are developed.

When we witness an event experienced by another person and this model appears very satisfied with the experience, the observer's perceptions are reinforced and he or she will tend to

repeat the experience. Thus to develop caring in the gifted, they need to be surrounded by caring persons as models. To help us become better caring teachers, parents or administrators of gifted learners, let us examine the qualities of the caring person.

In the same way that someone wanting to become an excellent horseback rider would watch an excellent rider going through the motions, someone wanting to care would learn from a caring person. Knowing that most of you by profession are caring persons, you must have been in contact with teachers, parents and/or friends who cared for you. I would suggest that you take a few minutes and reflect upon the qualities of a caring person you do know or you have known and list the qualities, things she or he did or said that made that person a caring individual for you.

Among these qualities, teachers usually identify characteristics like being helpful, interactive, disciplined, encouraging and positive in recognizing your strengths. These are the characteristics found in a caring culture.

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1991) recently prepared a book that illustrates the importance of belonging to a group that cares prior to developing generous behavior. In their book, On Reclaiming Youth at Risk, they reported on their study of the wisdom of native Americans in their way of caring for their children and youth.

Based on observations and practical clinical experiences, they studied the traditions and wisdom of the American natives in their methods of natural education, which have positive effects on adjustment.

Brendtro and his colleagues (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1991; Brendtro and Brokenleg, 1993) identified four major areas of development which grow from the experience of belonging, mastering, becoming independent and feeling generosity. The authors' perception is that a person must experience belonging by having a positive link to a group, a family or a tribe where feeling at home and being affirmative about belonging to the group is expressed. With the sense of belonging, the acquisition of mastery comes from identifying models for skills to be acquired in play as well as work. The competent (master) person is able to take control of his or

her own needs and become independent. Generosity, which includes sharing and caring, is the fourth step represented in a colourful native graphic called the circle of courage.

From this study on native Americans, we could say that to become a caring person, one must experience belonging rather than rejection, mastery rather than failure, autonomy rather than dependence and then generosity.

This confirms the importance of caring and from your participation I believe that we care for the gifted. It means that some Canadians care... but does Canada care?

DOES CANADA CARE?

In Canada, three provinces have provisions in their education legislation for services to gifted learners; they are Saskatchewan, Ontario and Alberta. Furthermore, all of the provinces and territories except Prince Edward Island and the Yukon have explicit statements in their departmental policies and guidelines on the education of the gifted. Since these policies express a will for a collective action on behalf of gifted and talented learners, it could be concluded that Canada does care for the gifted. However, focusing on some of the challenges in gifted education in Canada will help us answer the question of whether our country cares for the gifted student. Let us identify some of the issues or challenges that could affect the caring for gifted learners.

Regular education initiative in the post-integration decade.

A first issue or challenge that we could examine is the concept of mainstreaming or integration recently called the regular special education.

This major thrust, regular education initiative, has become the pride of different provinces in Canada over the last decade. In the book Special Education across Canada (Csapo, & Goguen, Eds., 1989), various authors (Mc Bride, 1989, Wilson, 1989, and Perner and Robert, 1989) describe the regular education initiative as the major accomplishment of the decade. Mc Bride

(1989, p. 12) describes the interfacing between regular and special education in British Columbia as a crucial issue which creates new relationships and new demands for curricular adaptation. Wilson (1989, p. 91) concludes her chapter by saying that in Ontario, erasing the distinction between regular and special education will permit educators to meet the learning needs of all pupils. In New Brunswick, the legislative change of 1986 relative to integration is presented by Perner and Roberts (1989, p. 103) as the stepping stone towards an integrated education system which makes all education "special".

A further analysis of practices in the regular education initiative on integration could show a decline in caring for gifted learners. In New Brunswick, the focus at the end of the last decade has been on integrating exceptional children (mostly the mentally handicapped who were in separate classes) within the mainstream of regular education. The tensions caused by the mainstreaming conditions and process and the focus on the needs of a subpopulation of exceptional children have left a narrow vision of the education of exceptional children. The promotion of integration and the heterogeneous grouping of all learners has led to the elimination of special groups for more advanced learners. Could the promotion of enrichment activities for all or cooperative learning for all be the answer for gifted learners? These privileged new options without teacher training and teaching materials could be a panacea that would not necessarily assure caring for all the gifted and talented.

Focus on math and science

In the recent focus on excellence, Canada, like other countries, wants to maintain a level of competitiveness on the international scene by streamlining academic development in math and science. Although this focus might bring services to the gifted learners, it could restrict enriched education to the areas of math and science only.

A non-categorical perspective

In the provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan in particular, a non-categorical perspective on serving learners with special needs is being advocated. While the provision of appropriate education to the gifted may be assured in such a framework, some jurisdictions could develop a fear of identification and thus not provide the caring to the gifted learners. The fear of identification could be a barrier to service delivery but a non-categorical perspective could allow proper education for all children.

THE GIFTED NEED CARING ADVOCATES

Are the emerging practices called the regular education initiative, the focus on math and science or the non-categorical perspective blessings or burdens to the gifted learners? Are these signs of increasing or decreasing care for gifted learners? Do we have indications that Canada does care for the gifted?

Changes in laws, regulations and departmental policies and guidelines in Canada over the last decade show that Canada does care for the gifted. Changes on behalf of the gifted have been happening through the advocacy of people who work for the gifted and talented in Canada, namely the Association for Gifted of the Canadian Council for Exceptional Children, the Association for Bright Children, and education for the gifted divisions of teachers' unions. Through its caring advocates, Canada cares for the gifted. Challenged by emerging initiatives, the educational systems needs you as advocates to ensure that caring to gifted will be cherished.

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